

P. Barnes, Clive  
P. O'Brien, Conor Cruise  
S. O'Brien, U. Murdock  
Angels

# Theater: Old Questions on the Congo Raised Again

## Conor Cruise O'Brien Depicts '60 Turmoil

By CLIVE BARNES

It was only 10 years ago—or a little more—that it seemed that the Congo was about to erupt into a major war, and the world watched fascinated and horrified while the United Nations performed its only major police action. Who was right, who was wrong? A black nationalist hero, Patrice Lumumba, was assassinated by political enemies. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, was later killed in an apparently mysterious plane crash.

Conor Cruise O'Brien has written a play about these strange Congolese events. He calls it "Murderous Angels," and it opened Monday night at the Playhouse Theater. It is a good, controversial political play—it excites the mind and certainly deserves to be seen. It revives many old questions, and is written with skill and insight.

The controversial aspect of the play comes from its interpretation of political events still warm from the oven of action. Mr. O'Brien himself represented Ireland in the United Nations from 1956 through 1961. Mr. Hammarskjöld sent him to Katanga as his Special Representative, he was part of the entire U.N. operation and witness to what went on there. However, I suspect that "Murderous Angels" is more fiction than fact and none the worse for that.

History today is as hot as a newsreel, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish

## The Cast

MURDEROUS ANGELS, a play by Conor Cruise O'Brien. Directed by Gordon Davidson; settings by Peter Wexler; costumes by Frank Thompson; lighting by Gilbert Hemsley Jr.; sound score by Pia Gilbert; film sequences designed by Sterling Johnson; Group One Productions and Jack Coddington; production stage manager, Daniel Freudenberg. Presented by the Phoenix Theater. T. Edward Hambleton, managing director, by arrangement with Elliot Martin and George W. George. At the Playhouse, 357 West 46th Street.

Baron D'Auge ..... Richard Venture  
Viscount Temworth ..... Neil Fitzgerald  
James Bonham ..... Richard Easton  
Mr. Ainsworth ..... Donald Symington  
Mr. Calvin ..... Humbert Allen Astredo  
Dag Hammarskjöld ..... Jean-Pierre Aumont  
Diallo Dico ..... Herbert Jefferson Jr.  
Monsieur Polycarpe ..... William Larson  
Father Boniface ..... Les Roberts  
Patrice Lumumba ..... Lou Gossett  
Madame Rose Rose ..... Barbara Colby  
Soviet Ambassador ..... Ben Hammer  
United States Ambassador ..... John Baragry  
U.N. Sergeant ..... Jack Landron  
White Scutter ..... John Clarkson  
Congolese Singer ..... Ula Walker  
Congolese Woman ..... Mabel Robinson  
Rajit Asdal ..... Gilbert Green  
Madame Pauline Lumumba ..... Ula Walker  
U.N. Attaché ..... Sharon Laughlin  
Col. Achille Zuyre ..... Joseph Mascolo  
Moose Ishomba ..... Leonard Jackson  
British Consul ..... John Clarkson  
U.N. soldiers, Congolese men and women:  
Fyrose Browne, Stephen Gotti,  
Cerry Murray, Lynda Westcott,  
Elwoodson Williams, Stephen Zukic

between what is intended as documentary and what is meant as poetic fiction. Mr. O'Brien's play is about the conflict of two men, both good, one warm, one cold, one in the sun, one in the ice, and their natural reaction to each other. It also poses larger questions, such as whether the sacrifice of individual life is justified by the wider concerns of international peace.

Frankly, I think Mr. O'Brien would have done better to have told his story of these murderous angels as honest fiction and left people to place what assumptions they liked upon it. At the moment it might seem legitimate to question Mr. O'Brien's command of history—and he certainly guesses an awful lot—while this is really irrelevant to the

quality or even the subject matter of the play.

Whether Mr. O'Brien's melodramatic assumptions—such as a homosexual Hammarskjöld being killed by a European capitalist conspiracy or a Lumumba being defended by an apparently fictitious white wife—are justified is of less importance than the serious political issues that the play raises. There is undoubtedly a worthwhile debate here, on white and black relations, on European colonialism, on wider moral issues, such as the importance of the individual compared with world peace.

Ultimately history is more a matter of gestures than of facts, and whether Mr. O'Brien's facts are right—what was Hamlet, Hecuba or Henry V to Shakespeare?—is of only minor importance. You can traduce history but still tell a few home truths. The interest of Mr. O'Brien's is the way in which he has taken the Congo conflict and explored not only its political implications—a still rich and corrupt Europe hanging desperately on to the limitless resources of a black and lordless Africa—but also the personal relationship of two men, of giant and disparate temperments, who hardly knew one another but effectively destroyed each other. This, I suspect, is poor history, but it is good theater.

The play was first staged in Los Angeles in February, 1970, and this is basically the same production, directed by Gordon Davidson. It has been changed a little, tightened here, tautened there, and the cast is different, but the evening remains the same and remains curiously fascinating.

## 'Murderous Angels' Is Curiously Fascinating

Mr. O'Brien writes with wit and style—quite a few lines have a Shavian shaft to them—and it is constant pleasure to be entertained by a dramatic intelligence of this grace and humor. It is a most interesting play, and Mr. O'Brien's humanity and political savvy gives it a very special flavor of its own.

This Phoenix Theater production has its own way with it. Mr. Davidson is a most accomplished director, and here he has concentrated on giving the documentary feel of history. Everything is acted as if it were white-hot, and the acting style has that special newsreel clip of reality to it. At least most of it has. Jean-Pierre Aumont, a decently tortured soul, was perhaps a little too obviously histrionic as Hammarskjöld. It was a performance that seemed more calculated than the play surrounding it.

Lou Gossett played Lumumba with just the right sense of urgency and soul, and his African accent was absolutely right in its pained Englishness. I also much admired Richard Easton as a seedily honest African expert, Richard Venture as a calculating, calculated capitalist and Herbert Jefferson Jr. as a bewildered black devotee of Hammarskjöld's idealism.

But this is a production with a sense of corporate style—that can be seen equally in the sparsely eloquent settings by Peter Wexler, the sensitive lighting by Gilbert Hemsley Jr. and the most expressive sound collage by Pia Gilbert. This is a distinguished and provocative addition to the season.